

Introduction

Imagine waking up one day to discover that the Martians have landed on Earth. Fortunately, they are benign, curious and highly intelligent – and they are keen to learn about human civilisation. You begin by telling them something about our mathematical and scientific theories, and they quickly grasp what you are talking about. You then show them some of our technological and engineering achievements – skyscrapers, planes and computers – and they are quite impressed. Your brief account of human history also interests them. You then take them to an art gallery. They are completely baffled. ‘But what is this stuff for?’, they ask. You mumble something about art illuminating the human condition. ‘This stuff illuminates the human condition?’, they ask in genuine surprise as you stroll through the modern art section. You then take them to a concert to listen to Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, but for all the pleasure it gives them you might as well take them to listen to the roar of traffic on a busy intersection. They simply cannot see the difference between music and noise. Finally, you get them to read a selection of plays, novels and poems. When they ask if *War and Peace* is true, you explain to them that literature is concerned not with fact but with fiction. The Martians quickly lose interest in this stuff called literature, and cannot see why anyone is interested in heaps of words that contain nothing but falsehoods. ‘If you want to understand human beings’, they say, ‘why not simply study history, psychology and anthropology?’



How would you go about trying to explain to the Martians the difference between art and non-art? And how would you try to convince them of the value of art?



Figure 11.1 Lascaux bull

The desire to create objects which are aesthetically pleasing rather than of practical value seems to exist in all cultures. More than twenty thousand years ago, our ancestors were daubing the walls of caves in Lascaux, France, with images of

- Which of the following would you classify as art? Give reasons for your choice.
- 1 Pottery
 - 2 Manufactured pots and pans
 - 3 Ballet
 - 4 Gymnastics
 - 5 Soccer
 - 6 The Grand Canyon

Since the arts have traditionally claimed a right to our thoughtful attention, we need to spend some time exploring their nature and value. Hence the question 'What is art?' In thinking about this question, the real focus of our interest is on what distinguishes worthwhile art from junk. At a practical level, this is an important question because we have limited amounts of time and money and we have to decide what to spend them on. We don't want to waste our time on junk and we don't want governments to waste our tax dollars buying junk for the national gallery, or supporting its production.

Most people would agree that for something to be a work of art, it must be made. A sunset may be beautiful and the Grand Canyon awe-inspiring, but neither would be called a work of art. Beyond this, opinions differ about what makes something art. We will explore three possible criteria:

- 1 the intentions of the artist
- 2 the quality of the work
- 3 the response of spectators.

What is art?

Although many of the examples in this chapter come from the visual arts, you should keep in mind that the arts include not only painting and sculpture, but also such things as dance, film, literature, music and theatre. You will therefore need to decide whether the points we make about a particular art-form apply to the arts in general.

- 1 What is art?
- 2 Are aesthetic judgments objective or subjective?
- 3 How do the arts contribute to our knowledge of the world?
- 4 What are the similarities and differences between the arts and the sciences?

We will consider four main questions in this chapter, all of which are connected with the relationship between art and knowledge.

most satisfying form of human life.

animals. Indeed, many people think that being a creative artist is the highest and tool-making and self-awareness – seems to distinguish human beings from other aesthetic urge is deeply rooted in the human psyche, and – along with language, mystified about why we engage in such apparently useless activities, but the surroundings has continued up to the present time. The Martians might be animals; and the irrepressible urge to paint, sing, dance, act and beautify one's

- 7 A holiday snap-shot of the Grand Canyon
- 8 A painting of the Grand Canyon
- 9 A beautiful face
- 10 A rock that happens to resemble a face
- 11 A child's drawing of a face
- 12 An artist's drawing of a face done in the naive style of a child
- 13 A caricature
- 14 Opera
- 15 Rap music
- 16 A piece of music generated by a computer
- 17 Bird song
- 18 The *Mona Lisa*
- 19 A copy of the *Mona Lisa* with a moustache and beard added
- 20 *Hamlet*
- 21 A TV soap opera
- 22 A nursery rhyme
- 23 A joke
- 24 A man dripping paint randomly on a canvas
- 25 A monkey dripping paint randomly on a canvas
- 26 Flower arranging
- 27 Flowers growing in a field
- 28 A bucket and mop left in an art gallery by a cleaner
- 29 A bucket and mop exhibited in an art gallery by an artist
- 30 A meal made by a famous chef

Intentions of the artist

According to the intention criterion, something is a work of art if it is made by someone with the intention of evoking an aesthetic response in the audience. (**Aesthetics** is a branch of philosophy which studies beauty and the arts.) We naturally think of an artist as wanting to communicate something to us, and communication is a deliberate, intentional activity. A sunset may evoke various emotions in us, but it is not a work of art because it does not *intend* to have any effect on us. Similarly, if some ants crawling around on a patch of sand happen to trace out what looks like a portrait of Tony Blair, we would not say they had produced a work of art. This is because the portrait is the result of random activity rather than conscious design.

If something is to count as a work of art, then it should not be made with a practical end in mind, but simply with the intention of pleasing or provoking people. You would not describe a manufacturer of pots and pans as an artist because his intention is to produce kitchen utensils rather than works of art. Admittedly, many functional objects also have an aesthetic element built into them, and I prefer attractive and elegant pots and pans to ugly and awkward ones. Nevertheless, there exists a special class of objects that are made with a specifically aesthetic intention, and these are the ones that we properly call works of art.

In his book *The Culture of Complaint*, the art critic Robert Hughes gives the following amusing example of what happens when art is judged merely by the intentions of the creator with no regard to its quality:

Imagine that Tracey Emin's work *My Bed* comes up for sale again. Would you be happy for your tax dollars to be used to buy the work for your local art gallery?

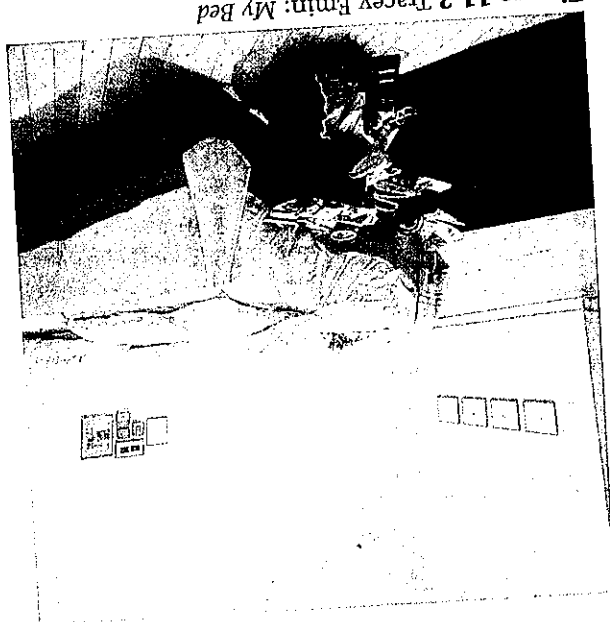


Figure 11.2 Tracey Emin: *My Bed*

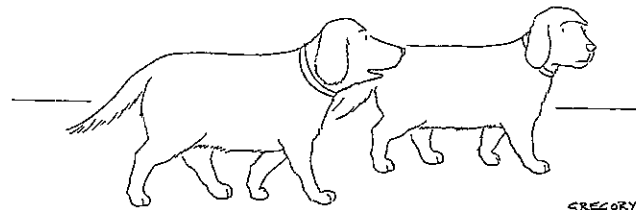
consists of an unmade bed with which was exhibited at the Turner Prize exhibition in London in 1999, and which the artist Tracey Emin did something not so different with a work called *My Bed*, magically transformed into a work of art simply because I intend it to be so? an art gallery with a glass case around it, and call it *Teacher's Work Desk* – VIII, is it an example, if I take my desk with papers and a half-drunk cup of coffee on it, put it in intending something to be art is enough to magically transform it into art. For Despite the appeal of the intention criterion, some critics have doubted that simply

Criticisms of the intention criterion

- 1 Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) once said that 'All art is quite useless.' What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree with him?
- 2 Do you consider cookery to be an art? How is it similar to other art forms, and how does it differ from them?

We can say, then, that works of art differ from natural objects in that they are made with an intention, and they differ from everyday objects in that they are made with the specific intention to please or provoke rather than for some practical end.

In Holland... the government set up a fund to buy work by artists almost irrespective of how good it was. All that mattered was that they should be alive and Dutch. About 8000 Dutch artists are represented in that collection. None of it is shown and as everyone in Holland except the artists involved now admits, about 98 per cent of it is rubbish. The artists think it's all junk except their own work. The storage, air-conditioning and maintenance expenses are now so high that they have to get rid of the stuff. But they can't. Nobody wants it. You can't give it away. They tried giving it to public institutions, like lunatic asylums and hospitals. But even the lunatic asylums insisted on standards – they wanted to pick and choose. So there it all sits, democratic, non-hierarchical, non-elitist, non-sexist, unsalable and, to the great regret of the Dutch government, only partially bio-degradable.



"What I do as an artist is take an ordinary object — say, a lamppost — and, by urinating on it, transform it into something that is uniquely my own."

Figure 11.3

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Taken together, our two criticisms of the intentions criterion suggest that the intentions of the creator are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for something to be a work of art. They are not necessary because something that was not originally intended as art may now be treated as such; and they are not sufficient because something that is intended as art might simply be junk.

Quality of the work

The second criterion for distinguishing art from non-art is the intrinsic quality of the work. This criterion is closely connected with the idea of *skill*. We generally expect an artist to have a high level of technical competence, and feel that an artist should be able to make a good likeness, a musician a pleasing melody, and a poet a well-crafted rhyme. In short, we feel that a work of art should not be something that a person with no talent or training in the arts could have made.

The belief that a work of art should have some kind of intrinsic quality has often been associated with the idea of beauty. Traditionally, it was believed that beautiful art is produced by painting beautiful objects, or by *revealing* the beauty in everyday objects. But, since we can speak of beauty with respect to the *form* of a work of art as well as its *content*, perhaps we should say that a great work of art is a perfect marriage of form and content.

The *content* of a work of art is what it depicts – such as a face, a landscape, or a bowl of fruit
 The *form* of a work of art concerns the way it is put together, and such things as unity, order, rhythm, balance, proportion, harmony and symmetry are relevant to it.

In fact, a great deal of modern art seems less concerned to produce beautiful things which please the senses than to shock or challenge the viewer. However, you might still feel that if a work of art is to be worthy of our interest it should have some kind of quality which reflects the skill of its creator.

- 1 According to one definition, 'beauty is the proper conformity of the parts to one another and to the whole'. Do you agree with this definition, or can you suggest a better one?
- 2 Do you think there are universal standards of beauty, or do you think they vary from country to country?
- 3 Do you think art can reveal the beauty in something that has not previously been seen as beautiful?
- 4 Compare the following two dictionary definitions of music, the first from 1911, the second from 1974. What do these suggest to you about the changing role of beauty in the arts?
 - a 'Art of combining sounds with a view to beauty of form and expression of emotion.'
 - b 'The science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationship.'
- 5 Can something be a great work of art and be disturbing or ugly or disgusting?

Criticisms of the quality criterion

Despite the appeal of the quality criterion, it is open to criticism. A work of art may, for example, have a great deal of technical competence but lack originality. There are plenty of competent but unoriginal artists churning out impressionist pictures for calendars and greeting cards. Such art is known as **kitsch** – from the German *verkitschen etwas* meaning to 'knock something off'. Kitsch is basically any form of clichéd art. The USA's 'most popular painting' – see page 342 – is an example of kitsch, as is the music you hear in shopping malls, or the soap operas you see on TV. The problem of **forges** is also relevant here. Perhaps the most famous forger of paintings was the Dutch artist Han Van Meegeren (1889–1947) who painted some fake Vermeers in the 1930s that fooled the art world and were widely accepted as genuine. (Vermeer was a seventeenth-century Dutch painter.) Even after Van Meegeren's hoax was exposed, some art critics continued to insist that the paintings were genuine! The best-known of Van Meegeren's 'Vermeers', called *The Disciples at Emmaus*, is shown below:



Figure 11.4 Van Meesteren: *The Disciples at Emmaus*



- 1 What do you think of the above painting? If it is any good, why should its value depend on who painted it?
- 2 Why is an exact copy of a painting worth far less than the original? Can this difference be justified, or is it simply an irrational prejudice?

The other side of the above point is that a work of art can sometimes show originality, and yet require little technical skill. Consider the bull's head by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). The head is made of an old bicycle saddle and a rusty pair of handlebars, and a small child probably *could* have put it together. Yet for Picasso to see beyond the everyday function of these objects was an astonishing insight and is, in a way, similar to a great writer making a strikingly original metaphor.

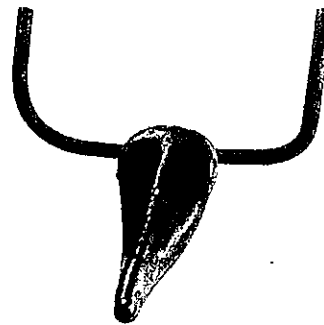


Figure 11.5 Picasso: *Bull's Head*

To summarise, we can say that quality and skill seem to be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for something to be a work of art. It is not necessary because works such as Picasso's *Bull's Head* are original but do not require much skill; and it is not sufficient because kitsch and forgeries may require skill but are hardly interesting works of art.

Response of spectators

The third criterion for distinguishing between art and non-art is the response of spectators. It might be said that, just as a joke requires someone to laugh at it, so a work of art requires an appreciative spectator in order to complete it. Writers want to be read, painters want exhibitions, and choirs crave an audience.

One of the key questions in thinking about this criterion is *which* spectators we should appeal to. Since 'the general public' usually prefer the familiar to the strange and content to form, they have often been hostile to new artistic movements, and many artists have had little time for their opinions. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) once observed that 'Time reverses the judgement of the foolish crowd', and there seems to be some truth in this. The 1913 world premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris was booed off stage by the audience, and Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) met with shock and outrage from his contemporaries. Both works are now considered to be part of the canon of great works of art.

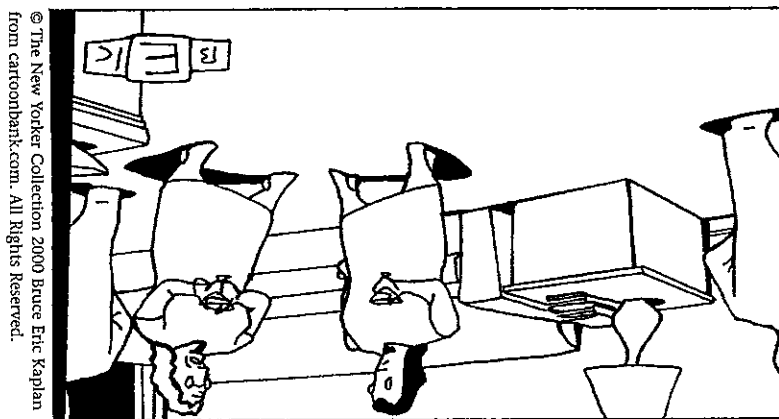


Figure 11.6
"I like his earlier work better, particularly the ones I said I didn't like at the time."

At the same time, we must keep in mind that some artists may have a vested interest in dismissing the opinions of the 'uninformed' public – for the public have the annoying habit of pointing out the absurdities of the more extreme fringes of modern art. An artist may comfort himself with the thought that many new works of art now accepted as great art were originally dismissed as 'rubbish' by the public; but perhaps some of the things the public dismiss as rubbish really are rubbish! At this point, we might appeal to expert opinion to help us to decide which works of art are genuinely worthwhile. Some people think it makes no sense to speak about 'expert opinion' in the arts on the grounds that you cannot argue about matters of taste. But good critics can help you to decide which of the millions of art works available are worth your time and attention; and they can also help you to see things in a work of art that you might otherwise have overlooked. Indeed, just as a psychoanalyst may reveal things about a person that they are not consciously aware of, so a good critic may understand the meaning of a work of art better than the artist who made the work. Admittedly, experts sometimes disagree

in their judgements, but their arguments are usually much more sophisticated than the 'I like it' / 'I don't like it' disagreements of those who do not have any background knowledge.



Do you think that the idea of expert opinion is more problematic in the arts than in the sciences? Give reasons.

Other ideas about the nature of art

Given the difficulties with the above criteria, a simple answer to the question 'what is art?' might be 'art is what is found in an art gallery or treated by experts as a work of art'.

Is everything art?

In the early twentieth century, the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) began exhibiting what he called 'readymades'. As the name suggests, these were simply objects taken out of their everyday context, renamed, and put in an art gallery. Perhaps the most famous of Duchamp's readymades was his work called *The Fountain*, which was a white porcelain urinal with the pseudonym 'R Mutt' daubed on it.

By suggesting that everyday objects might have aesthetic value, Duchamp can be seen as raising the question of where art ends and non-art begins. Taking our cue from Duchamp, we might be tempted to say that if we just opened our eyes we would see that *everything* is art. But if we say that *everything* is art, then the word 'art' is in danger of losing its meaning because it no longer distinguishes some things from other things. Just as 'high' only means something relative to 'not-high', so 'art' only means something relative to 'not-art'.



"I know more about art than you do,
so I'll tell you what to like."

Figure 11.7

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The paradox of aesthetic judgement

We might begin by observing that there is something paradoxical about aesthetic judgement. On the one hand, we take seriously the idea that there are standards of

Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* is generally considered to be part of the **canon** of great works of world literature, and it is widely studied in schools and colleges. You are doubtless familiar with other canonical works of art such as Mozart and Beethoven in music, Shakespeare and Goethe in literature, and Leonardo and Picasso in the visual arts. The question I now want to consider is how far our judgements about what distinguishes good art from bad are objective and how far they are influenced by the culture we grow up in and our personal tastes.

Judging art

Which of the music produced in the last ten years do you think will still be admired and listened to in a hundred years' time? Give reasons.

Perhaps the distinguishing feature of a great work of art is that it is *inexhaustible* in the sense that every time you come back to it you discover new things in it. A related idea is that great works of art stand the test of time and speak across generations and cultures. There is, for example, something extraordinary about the fact that Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* can move us with the same power and intensity that it moved Athenian audiences two and a half thousand years ago. Indeed, it could be argued that the winnowing effects of time act as a kind of *ideal spectator* helping us to distinguish enduring art from art which is merely fashionable.

Inexhaustibility

Instead of saying that everything is art we could perhaps rescue the above idea by saying that *everything can be looked at from an aesthetic point of view*. When something is put in an art gallery, that is precisely the way we are invited to look at it. Thus, while an unmade bed in a hotel room is unlikely to engage your aesthetic interest, if you put a glass case round it and put it in an art gallery, you will stop looking at it as a purely functional object, and this might set in motion the wheels of thought and feeling... But then again it might not! After all, just because something is in an art gallery does not necessarily mean that it is worthy of our interest.

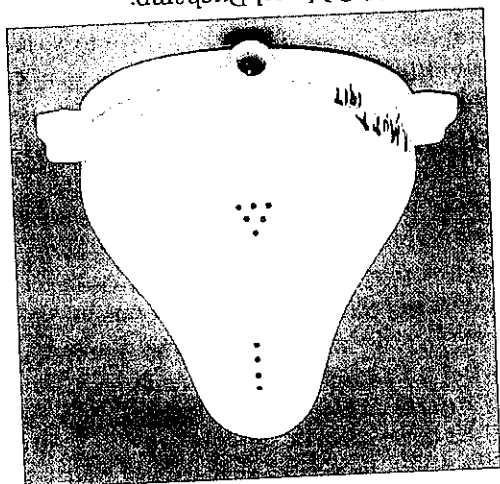


Figure 11.8 Marcel Duchamp: *The Fountain*

aesthetic judgement and that some judgements are better than others; on the other hand, we say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and there is no accounting for tastes.

The first half of the paradox – that there are standards of judgement – is what justifies a teacher grading a piece of creative writing, or a composition, or a painting, and it suggests that there are criteria for distinguishing good art from bad art. But the second half seems to be equally compelling; for it would appear that you cannot *argue* about tastes in the arts any more than you can argue about tastes in food. Either you like something or you don't like it. If I hate oysters and love burgers, you cannot tell me I am wrong, so why should you do this if I say that I hate Shakespeare and love J. K. Rowling (the author of the Harry Potter books)?



- 1 With reference to food and drink, does it make sense to speak of someone educating their palate, and learning to appreciate, say, good French wine?
- 2 'Tiger Woods is one of the best golfers in the world.' Is this a fact or an opinion? How is it similar to and how is it different from the kinds of judgements we make in the arts?
- 3 'It's a great work of art, but I don't like it.' How, if at all, can someone say this with consistency?

With reference to culinary tastes, it is worth pointing out that although we have some basic likes and dislikes that are permanent features of our make-up – I cannot imagine *ever* liking oysters – it may still make sense to speak of educating our culinary tastes. You may, for example, learn to appreciate the 'vocabulary' of Thai cuisine, such as the subtle blend of peppers, coconut and lemon grass in a green curry. If we can learn to educate our culinary tastes, then perhaps we can also learn to educate our artistic tastes.

Should aesthetic judgements be disinterested?

According to the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), there is a big difference between judgements of taste and aesthetic judgements. For, unlike judgements of taste, aesthetic judgements make a universal claim and have a sense of 'ought' built in to them. You can see this if you compare the following two statements:

- 1 'I like this painting.'
- 2 'This painting is beautiful.'

If I say I like the painting and you say you *don't* like it, these two statements can happily coexist with one another. But if I say that the painting is beautiful and you say that it is *not* beautiful, then we are contradicting one another. To say that something is beautiful implies that other people *ought* to find it beautiful. Kant put it well when he said that in our aesthetic judgements we are 'suitors for agreement'.

According to Kant, what distinguishes aesthetic judgements from personal tastes is that they are **disinterested**. If you see a picture of a Banana Split on a dessert

Are there universal standards in art?

Psychological factors

Since all human beings share the same basic perceptual equipment, you might expect to find some similarities in our aesthetic judgements. Consider, for example, the two paintings on page 341 the first by J. M. Turner (1775–1851) and the second by David Bomberg (1900–1957).

Write down five to ten adjectives that come to mind when you look at the first painting. Now do the same for the second painting. Compare your list with someone else's. How similar are your lists? What, if anything, does this suggest to you about the nature of aesthetic judgement?

he is not to your taste. Shakespeare; but you can acknowledge that he is a great writer even if you find that think that Pele was a bad footballer. This is not to say that everyone should like thinks that Shakespeare is a useless writer they are surely at least as wrong as if they do not have any clear rules for determining winners and losers. But if someone also do so in the case of the arts. Admittedly, the arts differ from sports in that they since we take seriously the idea of standards in sports, then perhaps we should who know about these kinds of thing.

in Pele, or in soccer; but the fact is that he is considered a great player by people could be argued that it is more of a *fact* than an opinion. You may not be interested sports. For example, if you say 'Pele was one of the best footballers of all time', it he does not like them. We also take seriously the idea that there are standards in he is able to rise above his own prejudices and appreciate their style – even though principle to recognise the beauty of a rival team's playing style. He is *disinterested* if judgements about sports. A soccer fan, for example, is *interested* if he refuses in There is an interesting parallel here between aesthetic judgements and so that we can appreciate it from a more universal standpoint.

it, but rather that we should try to go beyond our individual tastes and preferences at a work of art disinterestedly, he does not mean that we should be *uninterested* in on the literary merits or demerits of the play. When Kant says that we should look during a performance of it. But the tragedy of Lincoln's assassination has no bearing play *Our American Cousin* because her husband, Abraham Lincoln, was assassinated not bring your biography with you. I imagine that Mary Todd Lincoln hated the The point is that if you are going to judge a work of art on its merits you should *aesthetic responses*.

each case *interested*. There is nothing wrong with such responses, but they are not in your life', or Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* because you are hungry, you are not in love with the actress, or a piece of music because it reminds you of 'a happy time rather than evoke an aesthetic response. Similarly, if you like a play because you are menu, you are *interested* in the sense that it is likely to fuel your desire for ice-cream



Figure 11.9 Turner: *The Lake, Petworth: Sunset, a Stag Drinking*

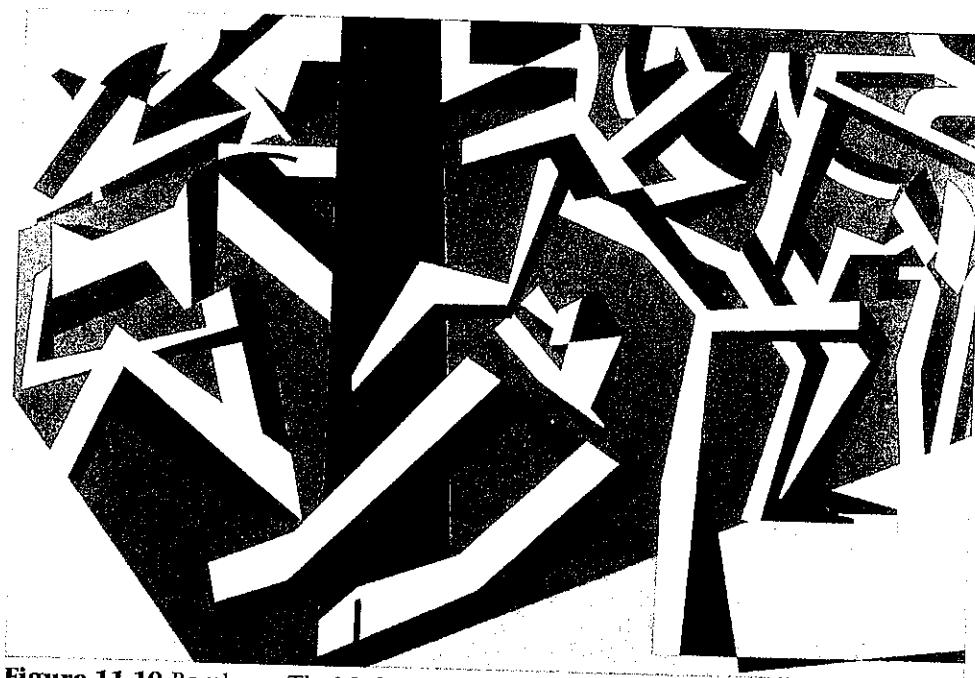


Figure 11.10 Bomberg: *The Mud Bath*

I wonder what adjectives you came up with to describe these paintings. My guess is that you used words like 'peaceful' and 'serene' for the first, and 'disturbing' and 'aggressive' for the second. I would be very surprised if any of you described the first painting as 'disturbing' and the second as 'peaceful'. Why do most people find the Turner peaceful and the Bomberg disturbing? The fact that the former consists mainly of horizontals and the latter mainly of diagonals is surely relevant; and it could be argued that since we are subject to the pull of gravity, we naturally tend to find the former peaceful and the latter disturbing. There is, of course, a great deal more to paintings than the juxtaposition of lines, but this is a significant element we can analyse in considering the effect they have on us.

Find some more examples of paintings in which either horizontals or diagonals predominate and consider the extent to which the former are generally peaceful and the latter generally disturbing.

Komar and Melamid

Further evidence for the idea that some aesthetic judgements are universal comes from two Russian artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who set out to discover what kinds of painting people find most attractive. To their surprise, they found a striking similarity in the most popular paintings across a wide range of cultures. What these paintings had in common was that they depicted landscapes in which one can see without being seen. Some people have argued that our preference for such landscapes is rooted in our biological past, and it is not hard to see why they might appeal to a human animal struggling to survive in a hostile world.



Figure 11.11 Komar and Melamid: The USA's Most Popular Painting

Other research by Komar and Melamid indicates that there is a similar universality in people's musical tastes. We might speculate that the metronome of the human pulse is the biological basis for our sense of rhythm in music. Rather than attribute the similarity of people's aesthetic tastes to biology, some people argue that it derives from the fact that we live in a world that is dominated by American culture. Since we are increasingly exposed to the same kind of image on posters, the same kind of music in shopping malls, and the same kind of movie in cinemas, it is perhaps not surprising that, despite our cultural differences, we end up with broadly similar tastes.



- 1 Do you think the world is becoming culturally more homogeneous? To what extent do you think that your own cultural tradition is under threat?
- 2 To what extent do you think there are universal standards of what makes a face beautiful, and to what extent do you think it varies from culture to culture?

Cultural differences

At this point we might ask how similar the artistic tastes of different cultures really are. To some extent, it is simply a matter of perspective: for some people are more inclined to see the similarities between things, and others are more inclined to see the differences between them. Given our discussion, we may decide that there are universal elements running through all cultures; but this should not blind us to the differences between them. You can get an idea of such differences by looking at two paintings below of Derwent Water in England, the top done by an English painter, the bottom by a Chinese painter. Although they show the same scene, they are strikingly different in style.

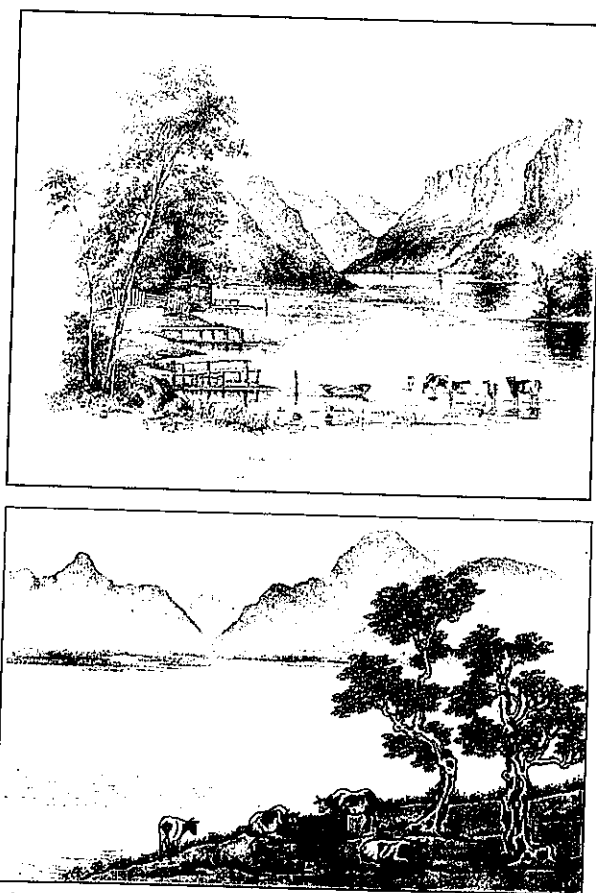


Figure 11.12 Two paintings of Derwent Water

The difference between Chinese opera and European opera is even more striking, and those accustomed to one tradition may – initially at least – find it very difficult to make sense of what is going on in the other. In the same way, someone raised on baseball may find it difficult to make sense of cricket. However, in the case of both sports and the arts, we may be able to learn a new vocabulary and gradually come to appreciate the subtleties of a sporting or artistic tradition that is different from our own.

How much can we learn about the way a culture sees the world by studying the art that it produces?

Art and knowledge

Since works of art do not have any practical function like other man-made objects, you might think that their only purpose is to give pleasure. Doubtless, works of art do frequently give us pleasure, but many people would say that they also contribute to our knowledge of the world. To explore this idea further, let us consider three popular theories about the nature of art:

- 1 art as imitation
- 2 art as communication
- 3 art as education.

Art as imitation

Perhaps the best-known theory of art is the imitation or copy theory which says that the purpose of art is to copy reality. (This is also known as the mimetic theory of art. *Mimesis* is Greek for 'imitation'.) Many great artists, such as Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), have subscribed to some version of this theory, which derives its plausibility from the fact that we naturally expect a portrait to be a good likeness of its sitter, or a novel to be true to life. Since it requires great skill to paint well or to describe something accurately in words, the arts have for much of their history been driven by the desire to achieve a perfect likeness. The development of perspective in the fifteenth century was a major step forward in the pursuit of this goal in the visual arts. But the invention of the camera in the nineteenth century put the whole project in question. Why try to copy the world by daubing paint on a canvas when a perfect image can be produced at the click of a button? This led to revolutionary changes in the visual arts which spilled over into the other arts and led people to start questioning traditional assumptions in other areas such as music and literature. The copy theory had, in any case, never seemed satisfactory when applied to music. What, after all, could a Mozart piano concerto, or a Beethoven symphony, be a copy of? You might even have doubts about the copy theory when applied to photography. For although photos are in a sense copies of reality, some capture a landscape or a person's likeness better than others. A good likeness, we might say, is one that, out of the thousands of possible images, captures 'the essential you'.

While holiday snapshots are simply meant to remind us of 'happy times' and do not have much to do with art, a skilled photographer with a good eye is clearly doing a great deal more than pressing a button and taking a copy of the world.



- 1 According to a well-known saying, 'The camera never lies.' Do you agree or disagree with this?
- 2 Do you think that some photos of you capture your likeness better than others? How is this possible?
- 3 Does a colour photograph capture nature more accurately than a black and white one?
- 4 Give some arguments for and against the claim that photography is an art.

Before rejecting the copy theory, we should perhaps analyse in more detail what it means to copy something. You might think that to copy something is simply to reproduce what you see and that there is no more to be said. But in reality things are not as simple as that; for as we saw in Chapter 4, seeing does not passively mirror reality, but has an element of interpretation built into it. This point opens the way to a more sophisticated version of the copy theory in which we think of art not as a slavish reproduction, but as a *creative reinterpretation* of reality.

According to this more sophisticated view, great art helps us to see the world with new eyes by drawing attention to previously unnoticed features of reality. This, I think, is what the Swiss painter Paul Klee (1878–1940) meant when he observed, 'Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible'. For example, an artist may reveal the beauty of an everyday object, or the play of light on a lily pond, or the geometric forms underlying the human body, which we have never noticed before, but which we *now recognise for the first time*. When reading a novel, you may have had the experience of reading a passage and thinking to yourself, 'That is exactly what I have always felt' – and yet you were never previously aware of it!

The idea here, then, is that the arts can subtly influence the way in which we experience the world. Some people have suggested that we see faces differently after Rembrandt's self-portraits, think about love differently after *Romeo and Juliet*, and feel differently about the seasons after Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Although these may not be your aesthetic points of reference, you might ask yourself how much the images you see, and the films you watch, and the music you listen to affect the way you see things.



- 1 Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) once said that 'Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.' What do you think he meant by this?
- 2 When Picasso (1881–1973) was told that his portrait of Gertrude Stein didn't look like her, he said, 'Never mind, it will!' What do you think he meant by this?
- 3 The poet Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) once said 'Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor.' What do you think he meant by this?

A second way of thinking about art is as a means of communication. It seems natural to think of an artist as trying to communicate a message to a spectator. Indeed, we sometimes speak of 'the language of art', but it is, of course, quite different from ordinary language. If you try to explain a poem in prose, the real meaning of the poem will escape you. Similarly, the sense of triumphant joy in the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony goes beyond anything that can be expressed in words.

The analogy between art and language suggests that, just as you need to understand the grammar and vocabulary of a language to know what a native speaker means, so you may need to understand the grammar and vocabulary of art in order to know what an artist means. So perhaps before dismissing, say, classical music or modern art, we need to make an effort to learn the language. We are then in a better position to decide whether what is being communicated is worthwhile or not.

Art as communication

- 1 To what extent can Thomas Kuhn's talk of **paradigms** be applied to the arts?
- 2 Do you think that people turn to the arts more to be challenged or more to be comforted?
- 3 Give some examples of great artists who were not recognised by their contemporaries. Give some examples of great artists who were recognised by their contemporaries. What conclusions would you draw from this?

While new movements in the arts challenge our understanding of reality, they can in time lose their shock value and simply become part of the way in which a culture sees the world. Thus what is **avant-garde** art to one generation may be normal to the next and kitsch to the third. Rather than challenge and provoke, kitsch is designed to soothe and reassure people. Against kitsch, it could be argued that the real job of art is to question traditional ways of looking at things and give us new ways of experiencing the world. Since many people prefer the comfortable to the challenging, it is perhaps not surprising that many great artists who struck out in new directions were not recognised by their contemporaries.



Figure 11.13 Picasso: Gertrude Stein



To what extent do you think you can understand or appreciate a work of art if you know nothing about the context?

We might think of the art-as-communication theory as having two dimensions to it: a horizontal one which enables us to explore the breadth of human experience, and a vertical one which enables us to explore its depth.

With respect to breadth, literature, in particular, can be a remarkably effective way of imaginatively projecting ourselves into situations that lie beyond the frontiers of our own lives, and in this way it enables us vicariously to broaden the scope of our experience. As the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–) put it:

Art can amplify man's short time on this earth by enabling him to receive from another the whole range of someone else's lifelong experiences with all their problems, colours and flavours. Art recreates in flesh experiences that have been lived by other men, and enables people to absorb them as if they were their own.

With respect to depth, the arts seem to be particularly concerned with communicating emotions. According to philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), 'The artist proper is a person who, grappling with the problem of expressing a certain emotion, says, "I want to get this clear".' Many people instinctively turn to the arts if they feel something deeply enough. Part of the reason for this may be that ordinary language seems to be unable to capture the uniqueness and complexity of our deepest emotions. When you are in love with someone, the words 'I love you' somehow fail to do justice to your feelings – for that is what everyone says. So you may reach for a poem or a piece of music to try to make sense of the depth and intensity and uniqueness of your feelings.



- 1 How is music similar to a language and how is it different from a language?
- 2 Are there things that can be expressed in music, but not in language? Are there things that can be expressed in language but not in music?
- 3 Why do you think so much pop music has love as its theme? To what extent does such music help you to understand your own emotions?

Art as education

According to a third theory of the arts, the arts have a moral and educative role. The connection between the arts and ethics is said to derive from the fact that they provoke emotions that influence our behaviour. They also shape our attitudes by offering us a range of role-models. For the ancient Greeks, Homer's *Iliad* played a key role in a young man's moral education. We now have Hollywood, and we might speculate about the extent to which the movies we watch influence our attitudes about good and bad, and right and wrong. At a more general level, it could be said that great art challenges us to question our assumptions by giving us a

Plato versus Aristotle

While the arts are sometimes described as 'the language of the emotions', some people are suspicious of them precisely because they appeal to emotion rather than reason. This view can be traced back to Plato (428–348 BCE) who held that, by inflaming the emotions, art weakens our ability to lead rational lives. He therefore banished artists from the ideal society which he described in his famous work, *The Republic*. Plato's younger contemporary, Aristotle (384–322 BCE), had a different view of the relation between art and emotion. According to him, art does not *incite* emotion

up being both a bad artist and a bad preacher. and tries to teach moral lessons through her art, there is a danger that she will end purely on its aesthetic rather than its ethical merits. When an artist starts to preach Despite the above points, some people insist that a work of art should be judged compulsory literature courses for their law students. This may explain why in recent years some universities have introduced ethics. This encourages us to go beyond simplistic black-and-white ways of thinking about encourages us with moral problems in all their real-life messiness and ambiguity, it presents us with moral problems in all their real-life messiness and ambiguity, it space in which to test and sharpen our moral intuitions. Since good literature We might also think of works of literature as thought experiments which give us a

What can a war poem tell you about the First World War that a purely factual account cannot?

different perspective on things. Almost all works of art raise some kind of question about how we ought to see things, or think about things, or live our lives. So, in Thinking more about the relationship between art and ethics, we might say that the arts broaden our awareness, develop our empathy, and sharpen our intuitions. In discussing art as communication, we saw that literature can be said to give us a sense of the variety of possible lives that can be lived, and so help to give us a broader conception of what it means to be human. The awareness that there are other equally valid perspectives on the world may make us more willing to question and reflect on our own values and move beyond the inevitable limitations of our own culture towards a more universal perspective on things. Literature can also develop our ability to empathise with other people by enabling us to imaginatively project ourselves into situations that lie beyond the frontiers of our own experience. By communicating the inside of another person's experience to us, a great novel or play can move and inspire us in a way that a purely factual description or an abstract book on ethics cannot. We may, for example, get a sense of what it is like to be a woman in a conformist society struggling to break out of an oppressive marriage, or a prisoner coping with the numbing harshness of life in a Soviet labour camp, or a young black man trying to maintain his integrity in the face of a racist apartheid regime, or a victim of the Pinochet regime in Chile coming to terms with the disappearance of her children.

as much as *purge*, or *cleanse* us of it. This cleansing effect is known as **catharsis**. A good example would be someone who goes to watch a 'tear jerker' at the movies, and feels better after 'a good cry'. Given the number of violent and pornographic movies that are readily available, the dispute between Plato and Aristotle is of great contemporary relevance.



- 1 Why do you think some people watch movies that they know in advance will terrify them, or make them cry?
- 2 Do you think that watching violent movies makes people more or less likely to be violent?
- 3 When, if ever, do you think that a work of art should be censored?

Whatever your view of the effect of the arts on our emotions, there are reasons for doubting that they have a civilising influence on people. Some people have argued that even morally uplifting art stimulates sentimentality rather than action. You may weep at scenes of injustice in a movie, thereby convincing yourself that you are a caring individual, and yet be blind to injustice in the real world. The great thing about imaginary – as opposed to real – injustice is that it requires only an imaginary response. At worst, literature can make us feel good about ourselves in a way which costs us nothing and becomes a substitute for rather than provocation to action.

More disturbingly, the historical record suggests that the arts have done little to inoculate people against barbarism. The twentieth century has thrown up plenty of literate tyrants, such as Hitler, Lenin, Stalin and Mao; but their interest in the arts did nothing to stop them organising the slaughter of human beings on an industrial scale. Perhaps the problem with such tyrants was, as the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky (1940–96) noted with chilling understatement, that their hit lists were longer than their reading lists.

In the absence of clear evidence one way or the other, the belief that the arts can civilise us may come down to a matter of faith. I, for one, would like to believe that it is true!



- 1 Analyse a moral dilemma in a novel with which you are familiar. How, if at all, has it affected the way you think about ethics?
- 2 Do you think that teachers of art and literature have greater moral sensitivity than teachers of physics and chemistry? What implications does this have for our discussion about the relation between the arts and ethics?
- 3 To what extent do you think artists ought to engage with the political issues of the day?

Science, art and truth

Whatever the relationship between the arts and knowledge, there seems to be a big difference between the contribution made by the arts to our understanding of the world and that made by the sciences. Indeed, these two areas of knowledge have often been separated by a gulf of mutual incomprehension. On the one hand, some artists accuse the sciences of robbing the world of its mystery. 'Knowledge', said the English writer D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), 'has killed the sun making it a ball of gas with spots.' On the other hand, the arts have sometimes been dismissed by people of a scientific bent as little more than a frivolous diversion.

- 1 How are scientists and artists portrayed in some of the Hollywood movies with which you are familiar?
- 2 If cutbacks in your school's education budget required that you cut either a science subject or an arts subject from the school curriculum, which would you cut and why?

Reason, imagination and beauty

Despite the obvious differences between the arts and the sciences, there are also some interesting similarities between them. At the deepest level, we might say that both are trying to make sense of the world by looking for patterns in things. The difference is that in science the patterns are expressed in mathematics and logic, and in the arts they are expressed in more allusive and intuitive forms.

What would you say are the main similarities and differences between the arts and the sciences? The following words may help to stimulate your thinking:

reason	fiction	beauty	creation	general	inside	outside	particular
			discovery			emotion	fact

Furthermore, although science appeals more to reason, and art more to imagination, reason and imagination play an important role in both areas of knowledge. On the one hand, an artist needs to impose some kind of rational control on her creative insights if they are to be of lasting value. If, for example, you are writing a love poem, you can't simply write down your feelings – you need to impose some kind of form on them. On the other hand, a scientist needs to have a good imagination if he is to come up with new ways of looking at things. Interestingly, many great scientists have appealed to the beauty of some of their ideas to justify them. For example, Albert Einstein (1879-1955) once observed that the theory of relativity was too beautiful to be false. After the theory was confirmed by astronomers during a solar eclipse in 1919, Einstein was asked what he would

have done if the results had contradicted rather than confirmed his theory. He replied: 'Then I would feel sorry for the good Lord. The theory is correct.' Such a reference to beauty is, at first sight, puzzling; but it makes sense once we realise that beauty and order are closely related concepts, and that a scientist's appeal to beauty is usually a reflection of his conviction that the universe is orderly.

The Einstein story shows that aesthetic considerations play a role in convincing scientists of the truth of their theories. However, two important points should be kept in mind. First, the kind of beauty scientists are thinking about is often of a mathematical nature and cannot be appreciated unless you have a training in mathematics. Second, beauty is no guarantee of truth. If Einstein's theory of relativity had been repeatedly contradicted by experimental results, he would eventually have had to abandon it and think again. For it is always possible that the universe operates with an aesthetic that is quite different from our own.

Discovered or invented?

One important difference between science and art would seem to be that while scientific laws are *discovered*, works of art are *invented*. But, as usual, things are not quite as simple as they appear. Many great artists have felt that their work is as much one of discovery as of invention – that the form is somehow already out there waiting to be unpacked. 'The pages are still blank', said the novelist Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), 'but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible.' This idea is nicely illustrated by Michelangelo's (1475–1564) famous unfinished sculptures known as *The Prisoners*. When we look at these figures, it is hard to avoid the feeling that they are already in the marble and are simply waiting to be released with the help of the sculptor's chisel.

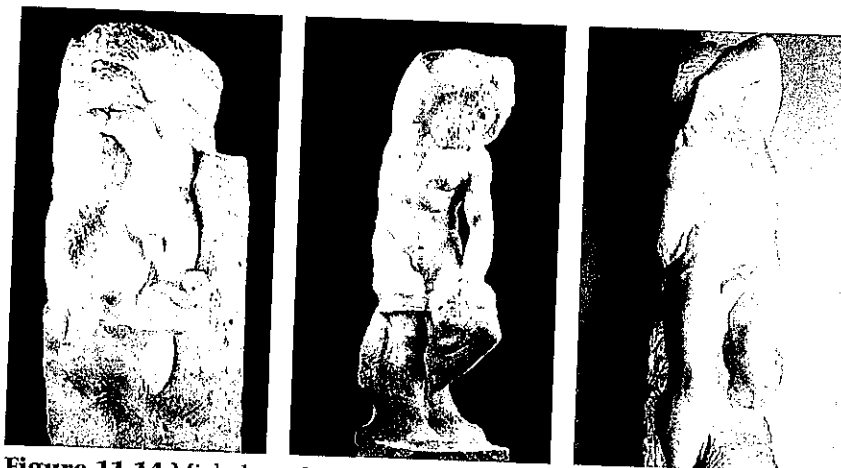


Figure 11.14 Michelangelo: *The Prisoners*

Just as some people have argued that art is as much discovery as invention, so others have argued that science is as much invention as discovery. To support this idea, they point out that even if a scientific law is useful and illuminating, it may eventually turn out to be false. That, after all, was the fate of Newtonian physics. So

The arts and truth

What, then, can we say about the relationship between the arts and truth? At the literal level, the Martians at the beginning of this chapter would seem to be right in saying that works of art are by definition untrue because they deal with fiction – rather than fact. But at a deeper level we might speak of the **paradox of fiction** – the fact that fiction is sometimes able to reveal deep truths about the human condition. While it may seem strange that we human beings often turn to fiction in search of the truth, it also seems to be true!

objective measurable facts.

remind us that subjective experience is as much a part of the scheme of things as With this in mind, it could be argued that at the most general level the arts help to *experience* of love. We are back to the idea of art as the language of the emotions. love, it is to the arts that many people instinctively turn to make sense of the be able to tell you what happens to your hormones and heart-beat when you fall in complex experiences. Think again of an emotion such as love. While science may Admittedly, soup is not a major theme in the arts, but they do deal with other good for you, it has nothing to say about what it feels like to drink soup on a cold day. meant by this is that while science can tell you what soup is made of and why it is Einstein once said that science does not give the taste of the soup. What I think he while science looks at things from the outside, art looks at them from the inside. balanced outlook we need both. Following this line of thought, it could be argued that that they are complementary ways of making sense of the world and that for a Another way of thinking about the relation between the sciences and the arts is to say

Science and art as complements

'discovery' more in the case of the former than in that of the latter. is lacking in the case of the arts. And it is this which justifies our using the word works of science, but that there is an impersonal aspect to scientific discoveries that What this example suggests is not that works of art are more precious than

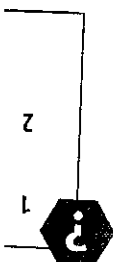
to write *Hamlet*. The play as we know it will be lost for ever. as Darwin.) But if Shakespeare's manuscript meets a similar fate, no one else is going Alfred Russel Wallace, 1823–1913, came up with the theory around the same time sooner or later someone else will come up with the theory of evolution. (In fact, *Origin of Species*. Why? Because if Darwin's manuscript goes up in smoke, then

There is an argument for saying that you should go for *Hamlet* rather than *The* only have time to rescue one of the books. Which should you rescue? the other room. Ignoring the danger to yourself, you leap in to the building, but you *Origin of Species* is in one room and the last surviving copy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is in following situation. A building is on fire and the last surviving copy of Darwin's *The* than invented, and that art is more invented than discovered. To see why, imagine the Nevertheless, I think that it still makes sense to say that science is more discovered

rather than think of scientific laws as eternal truths, we should perhaps see them as *useful fictions* which help us to make sense of reality.

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- 1 What can science tell us about the nature of love that the arts cannot; and what can the arts tell us about the nature of love that science cannot?
- 2 Take any work of art, piece of music, or novel of your choice and explain how it has given you a deeper understanding of some aspect of the human condition.
- 3 According to Noam Chomsky (1930-), 'It is quite possible – overwhelmingly probable, one might guess – that we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology.' What is your opinion about this?

We have drawn attention to the fact that the arts can help make sense of our experience of the world. Yet the kind of truth we find in them does seem to be different from that found in the sciences. If two scientific theories contradict one another, and one of them is true, then we must conclude that the other one is false. But when it comes to the arts, we may feel that two quite different works can be equally revealing of the truth. This suggests that when we look at a work of art, it may be more illuminating to ask, not 'Is it true?' but 'What has the artist seen?' Understood in this way, the arts might be said to contribute richness and depth to our experience of the world.



- 1 Do you think it makes sense to say that some works of art are 'truer' than others? Illustrate your answer with examples of your choice.
- 2 Do you think we can speak of artistic progress in the way we usually speak of scientific progress? What does this suggest to you about the similarities or differences between art and science?

Conclusion

We began this chapter with the story of Martians who have no understanding or appreciation of the arts. For human beings, however, a life without the arts is difficult to imagine and it would surely be a cold, grey, drab affair. (A single day without music would be more than some people could bear!) Since we derive great pleasure from the arts, that in itself is enough to justify them. But, as we have seen in this chapter, they can also be said to contribute to our knowledge of the world. Typically, great works of art make the familiar strange or make the strange familiar. At their best they can perhaps help us to recognise truths we were previously unaware of and reignite our sense of wonder at the world.

Donald Palmer, *Does the Center Hold?* (Mayfield, 1991), Chapter 10: 'But is it art?'. This chapter gives a clear and readable account of some major theories of art, including those of Plato, Aristotle, Freud, Marx and Wittgenstein.

Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Phaidon, 1960). This classic book by a famous art critic explores the psychology underlying the visual arts. Gombrich likens the visual arts to a language and he explores the way in which artistic styles and conventions influence the way we see the world.

Further reading

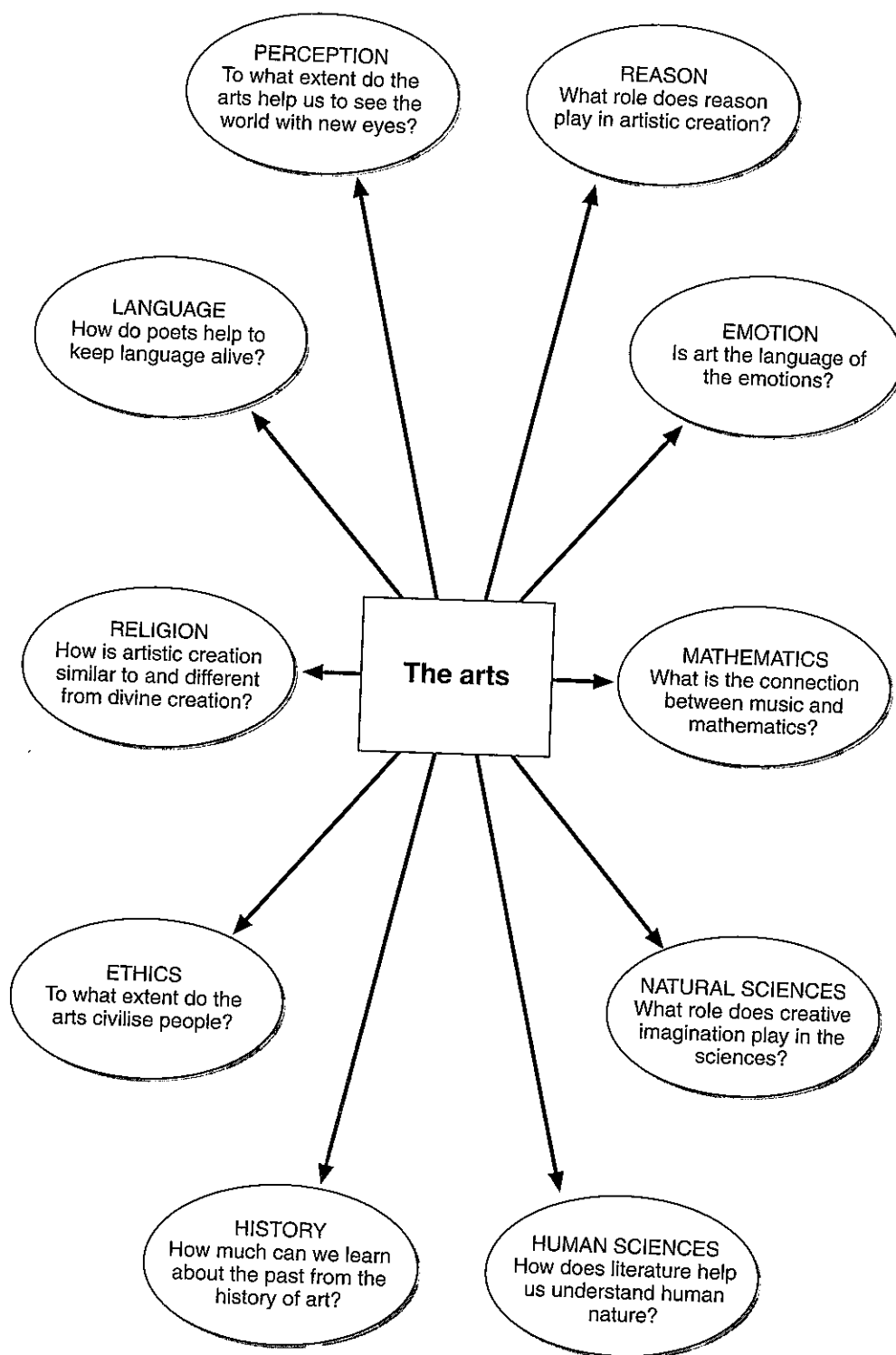
Terms to remember

aesthetics
avant-garde
beauty
canon
catharsis
disinterested
expert opinion
forgeries
form versus content
kitsch
mimesis

Key points

- Art of one form or another can be found in all cultures, and the desire to make aesthetically pleasing objects seems to be universal.
- Among the criteria for distinguishing art from non-art are the intentions of the artist, the quality of the work, and the response of spectators.
- It could be argued that great art stands the test of time and is inexhaustible in the sense that it constantly reveals new things to us.
- Although it is often said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, we take seriously the idea that there are standards for judging art.
- According to Immanuel Kant, aesthetic judgements differ from personal tastes in that they are disinterested.
- The copy theory of art says that the purpose of art is to copy reality; but it could be argued that art is not so much a slavish reproduction of reality as a creative reinterpretation of it.
- A second theory sees art as a means of communication which enables us to imaginatively project ourselves into new situations and communicate emotions that lie beyond everyday language.
- According to a third theory, the arts have an educative role and at their best broaden our awareness, develop our empathy and sharpen our moral intuitions.
- Despite the obvious differences between the arts and sciences, reason and emotion play an important role in both of these areas of knowledge.

Linking Questions





HOW MUCH ART CAN THE BRAIN TAKE?

Why do human beings lavish so much of their time and energy on what, from a biological point of view, might seem to be a frivolous activity, asks psychologist Steven Pinker.

Man does not live by bread alone, nor by know-how, safety, children, or sex. People everywhere spend as much time as they can afford on activities that, in the struggle to survive and reproduce, seem pointless. In all cultures, people tell stories and recite poetry. They joke, laugh, and tease. They sing and dance. They decorate surfaces.

As if that weren't enough of a puzzle, the more biologically frivolous and vain the activity, the more people exalt it. Art, literature, and music are thought to be not just pleasurable but noble. They are the mind's best work, what makes life worth living. Why do we pursue the biologically trivial and futile and experience them as sublime? To many educated people the question seems horribly

philistine, even immoral. But it is unavoidable for anyone interested in the makeup of *Homo sapiens*. Members of our species do mad deeds like living for their art and (in India) selling their blood to buy movie tickets. Why? How might we understand the psychology of the arts within the modern understanding of the brain as a biological organ shaped by the forces of evolution?

Every university has a faculty of arts, which usually dominates the institution in numbers and in the public eye. But the tens of thousands of scholars and millions of pages of scholarship have shed almost no light on the question of why people pursue the arts at all. The function of the arts is almost defiantly obscure, and I think there are several reasons why.

One is that the arts engage not only the psychology of aesthetics but the psychology of status. The very uselessness of art that makes it so incomprehensible to the evolutionary biologist makes it all too comprehensible to the economist and social psychologist. What better proof that you have money to spare than your being able to spend it on doodads and stunts that don't fill the belly or keep the rain out but that require precious materials, years of practice, a command of obscure texts, or intimacy with the elite?

Thorstein Veblen's and Quentin Bell's classic analyses of taste and fashion, in which an elite's conspicuous displays of consumption, leisure, and outrage are emulated by the rabble, sending the elite off in search of new inimitable displays, nicely explain the otherwise inexplicable oddities of the arts. The grand styles of one century become tacky in the next, as we see in words that are both period labels and terms of abuse (*gothic*, *romantic*, *manierist*, *baroque*, *rococo*). The steadfast patrons of the arts are the aristocracy and those who want to join them. Most people would lose their taste for a musical recording if they learned it was being sold at supermarket checkout counters or on late-night television, and even the

work of relatively prestigious artists, such as Pierre Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, draws derisive reviews when it is shown in a popular 'blockbuster' museum show. Modern and postmodern works are intended not to give pleasure but to confirm or confound the theories of a guild of critics and analysts, to *épater la bourgeoisie*, or to baffle the rubes in Peoria.

The banality that the psychology of the arts is partly the psychology of status has been repeatedly pointed out, not just by cynics and barbarians but by erudite social commentators such as Quentin Bell and Tom Wolfe. But in the modern university, it is unmentioned, indeed, unmentionable. Academics and intellectuals are culture vultures. In a gathering of today's elite, it is perfectly acceptable to laugh that you barely passed Physics for Poets and Rocks for Jocks and have remained ignorant of science ever since, despite the obvious importance of scientific literacy to informed choices about personal health and public policy. But saying that you have never heard of James Joyce or that you tried listening to Mozart once but prefer Andrew Lloyd Webber is as shocking as blowing your nose on your sleeve or announcing that you employ children in your sweatshop, despite the obvious [un]importance of your tastes in leisure-time activity to just about anything. The blending in people's minds of art, status, and virtue is an extension of Bell's principle of 'sartorial morality': people find dignity in the signs of an honorably futile existence removed from all menial necessities.

I mention these facts not to denigrate the arts but to clarify an important mystery in understanding ourselves. To understand the psychology of the arts, we have to look at the phenomena with the disinterested eye of an alien biologist trying to make sense of the human species rather than as a member of the species with a stake in how the arts are portrayed. OF COURSE we find pleasure and enlightenment in contemplating the products of the arts, and not all of it is a pride in sharing the tastes of the beautiful people. But to understand the psychology of the arts that remains when we subtract out the psychology of status, we must leave at the door our terror of being mistaken for the kind of person who prefers Andrew Lloyd Webber to Mozart. We need to begin with folk songs, pulp fiction, and paintings on black velvet, not Mahler, Eliot, and Kandinsky. And that does *not* mean compensating for our slumming by dressing up the lowly subject matter in highfalutin 'theory' (a semiotic analysis of *Peanuts*, a psychoanalytic exegesis of James Bond, a deconstruction of *Vogue*). It means asking a simple question: What is it about the mind that lets people take pleasure in shapes and colors and sounds and stories and myths?

That question might be answerable, whereas questions about Art in general are not. Theories of Art carry the seeds of their own destruction. In an age when any Joe can buy CDs, paintings, and novels, artists make their careers by finding ways to avoid the hackneyed, to challenge jaded tastes, to differentiate the cognoscenti from the dilettantes, and to flout the current wisdom about what art is (hence the fruitless attempts over the decades to define art). Any discussion that fails to recognize that dynamic is doomed to sterility. It can never explain why music pleases the ear, because 'music' will be defined to encompass atonal jazz, chromatic compositions, and other intellectual exercises.

It will never understand the bawdy laughs and convivial banter that are so important in people's lives because it will define humor as the arch wit of an Oscar Wilde. Excellence and the avant-garde are designed for the sophisticated palate, a product of years of immersion in a genre and a familiarity with its conventions and clichés. They rely on one-upmanship and arcane allusions and displays of virtuosity. However fascinating and worthy of our support they are, they tend to obscure the psychology of aesthetics, not to illuminate it.

Another reason the psychology of the arts is obscure is that they are not adaptive in the biologist's sense of the word. I believe there is much insight to be gained in studying the adaptive design of the major components of the mind, but that does not mean that everything the mind does is biologically adaptive. The mind is a neural computer, fitted by natural selection with algorithms for reasoning about plants, animals, objects, and people. It is driven by goal states that served biological fitness in ancestral environments, such as food, sex, safety, parenthood, friendship, status, and knowledge. That toolbox, however, can be used to assemble Sunday afternoon projects of dubious biological value.

Some parts of the mind register the attainment of increments of fitness by giving us a sensation of pleasure. Other parts use a knowledge of cause and effect to bring about goals. Put them together and you get a mind that rises to a biologically pointless challenge: figuring out how to get at the pleasure circuits of the brain and deliver little jolts of enjoyment without the inconvenience of wringing bona fide fitness increments from the harsh world. When a rat has access to a lever that sends electrical impulses to an electrode implanted in its medial forebrain bundle, it presses the lever furiously until it drops of exhaustion, forgoing opportunities to eat, drink, and have sex. People don't yet undergo elective neurosurgery to have electrodes implanted in their pleasure centers, but they have found ways to stimulate them by other means. An obvious example is recreational drugs, which seep into the chemical junctions of the pleasure circuits. Another route to the pleasure circuits is via the senses, which stimulate the circuits when they are in environments that would have led to fitness in past generations. Of course a fitness-promoting environment cannot announce itself directly. It gives off patterns of sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and feels that the senses are designed to register. Now, if the intellectual faculties could identify the pleasure-giving patterns, purify them, and concentrate them, the brain could stimulate itself without the messiness of electrodes or drugs. It could give itself intense artificial doses of the sights and sounds and smells that ordinarily are given off by healthful environments. We enjoy strawberry cheesecake, but not because we evolved a taste for it. We evolved circuits that gave us trickles of enjoyment from the sweet taste of ripe fruit, the creamy mouth feel of fats and oils from nuts and meat, and the coolness of fresh water. Cheesecake packs a sensual wallop unlike anything in the natural world because it is a brew of megadoses of agreeable stimuli which we concocted for the express purpose of pressing our pleasure buttons. Pornography is another pleasure technology. At least to some extent, art may be a third.

The visual arts are one example of a technology designed to defeat the locks

that safeguard our pleasure buttons and to press the buttons in various combinations. Vision solves the unsolvable problem of recovering a description of the world from its projection onto the retina by making assumptions about how the world is put together. Optical illusions, including paintings, photographs, movies, and television, cunningly violate those assumptions and give off patterns of light that dupe our visual system into seeing scenes that aren't there. That's the lock-picking. The pleasure buttons are the content of the illusions. Everyday photographs and paintings (the ones that most people hang in their living rooms, though not necessarily the ones you would see in a museum) depict plants, animals, landscapes, and people. Many biologists believe that the geometry of beauty is the visible signal of adaptively valuable objects: safe, food-rich, explorable, learnable habitats, and fertile, healthy dates, mates, and offspring.

Fiction and drama may be a mixture of the non-adaptive and the adaptive. John Dryden defined a play as 'a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject; for the delight and instruction of mankind.' It's helpful to distinguish the delight, perhaps the product of a useless technology for pressing our pleasure buttons, from the instruction, perhaps a product of a cognitive adaptation.

The technology of fiction delivers a simulation of life that an audience can enter in the comfort of their cave, couch, or theater seat. Words can evoke mental images, which can activate the parts of the brain that register the world when we actually perceive it. Other technologies violate the assumptions of our perceptual apparatus and trick us with illusions that partly duplicate the experience of seeing and hearing real events. They include costumes, makeup, sets, sound effects, cinematography, and animation. Perhaps in the near future we can add virtual reality to the list, and in the more distant future the feelies of *Brave New World*. When the illusions work, there is no mystery to the question 'Why do people enjoy fiction?' It is identical to the question 'Why do people enjoy life?' When we are absorbed in a book or a movie, we get to see breathtaking landscapes, hobnob with important people, fall in love with ravishing men and women, protect loved ones, attain impossible goals, and defeat wicked enemies. Not a bad deal for seven dollars and fifty cents!

Even following the foibles of ordinary virtual people as they live their lives can press a pleasure button, the one labeled 'gossip.' Gossip is a favorite pastime in all human societies because knowledge is power. Knowing who needs a favor and who is in a position to offer one, who is trustworthy and who is a liar, who is available (or soon to become available) and who is under the protection of a jealous spouse or family — all give obvious strategic advantages in the games of life. That is especially true when the information is not yet widely known and one can be the first to exploit an opportunity, the social equivalent of insider trading. In the small bands in which our minds evolved, everyone knew everyone else, so all gossip was useful. Today, when we peer into the private lives of fictitious characters, we are giving ourselves the same buzz.

Literature, of course, not only delights but instructs. Fictional narratives

might work a bit like experiments. The author places a fictitious character in a hypothetical situation in an otherwise real world, and allows the reader to explore the consequences. Once the fictitious world is set up, the protagonist is given a goal and we watch as he or she pursues it in the face of obstacles. We watch what happens to them and mentally take notes on the outcomes of the strategies and tactics they use in pursuing their goals.

What are those goals? A Darwinian would say that ultimately organisms have only two: to survive and to reproduce. And those are precisely the goals that drive the human organisms in fiction. Most of the thirty-six plots in Georges Polt's catalogue 'The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations' are defined by love or sex or a threat to the safety of the protagonist or his kin (for example, 'Mistaken jealousy,' 'Vengeance taken for kindred upon kindred,' and 'Discovery of the dishonor of a loved one'). The difference between fiction for children and fiction for adults is commonly summed up in two words: sex and violence. The American movie critic Pauline Kael got the title for one of her books from an Italian movie poster that she said contained 'the briefest statement imaginable of the basic appeal of the movies': Kiss Kiss Bang Bang.

Sex and violence are not just the obsessions of pulp fiction and trash TV. The writers Richard Lederer and Michael Gilleland present the following tabloid headlines:

- DOCTOR'S WIFE AND LOCAL MINISTER EXPOSED FOR CONCEIVING ILLEGITIMATE DAUGHTER
- TEENAGERS COMMIT DOUBLE SUICIDE; FAMILIES VOW TO END VENDETTA
- STUDENT CONFESSES TO AXE MURDER OF LOCAL PAWNBROKER AND ASSISTANT
- MADWOMAN LONG IMPRISONED IN ATTIC SETS HOUSE ON FIRE, THEN LEAPS TO DEATH
- PRINCE ACQUITTED OF KILLING MOTHER IN REVENGE FOR MURDER OF HIS FATHER

Sound familiar? They are the plots of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Eumenides*. The intrigues of people in conflict can multiply out in so many ways that no one could possibly play out the consequences of all courses of action in the mind's eye. Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them. The cliché that life imitates art is true because the function of some kinds of art may be for life to imitate it.

Of course, there is far more to the arts than pressing our pleasure buttons and playing out lurid scenarios. Art can help us see the world in new ways, give us a sense of harmony with the cosmos, and allow us to experience the sublime. But if we really want to understand this strange and eternally fascinating quick of the human brain, we cannot just exalt the finest examples. We have to look at the typical examples, and the mixture of motives that draws people to them.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

In this article, the biologist Lewis Wolpert draws attention to the differences between art and science and argues that, although art broadens our experience, it does not help us to understand how the world works.

The current vogue for believing that art and science should be brought together and share much is strongly promoted by the Wellcome Trust that gives many thousands of pounds to art/science projects... In the pack that goes with the Trust's new Science Museum exhibition bringing artists and neuroscientists together, Dr Raj Persaud says that understanding the universe might also need art, Baroness Greenfield that the two are merging, and James Lovelock expresses the belief that they have much in common. I completely disagree.

This obsession for showing that art – particularly the visual arts – is similar to science in content and the creative processes is bemusing. I detect in it an element of social snobbery – artists are envious of scientists and scientists want to be thought of as artists.

Early in the past century, the great German physicist Max Planck asserted that the scientist must work by using an essentially artistic imagination. More recently, Jacob Bronowski took a similar line: 'The discoveries of science, the works of art, are explorations – more, are explosions of a hidden likeness. The discoverer or the artist presents in them two aspects of nature and fuses them into one. This is the act of creation, in which an original act is born, and it is the same act in original science and original art.'

Science is about understanding how the world works, there being

only one correct explanation for any observed phenomenon. Unlike the arts it is a collective endeavour in which the individual is ultimately irrelevant – geniuses merely speed up discovery. If Watson and Crick had not got the structure of DNA we know that Franklin and Klug would soon have had it. Indeed simultaneous discovery is a common feature of science. If one could rerun the history of science and start again it would have a different history but the end results would be the same: water would be H₂O and genes would code for proteins but the names would be different.

How different are all the arts. No Shakespeare – no *Hamlet*; no Picasso – no *Guernica*. Moreover a work of art is capable of many interpretations and has moral content. There is but one correct scientific explanation for any set of observations and reliable scientific understanding has no moral or ethical content. Art is a personal creation and contains the personal views of the artist but whatever the feelings of the scientist these are absent from the final understanding of a process.

Because science is a communal process a scientist has to be very aware of what is known about the problem being investigated. There are strict criteria about lack of contradiction and, of course, correspondence with reality. Science makes progress, we build on the work of our current and earlier colleagues. To talk about progress in art makes no sense, there is

I challenge anyone who goes to Tate Modern to find in just one of the hundreds of paintings, sculptures and videos in this wonderful gallery anything that has a serious connection with science...

If the idea of creativity makes scientists want to be thought of as artists and vice versa, what about accountants, lawyers, engineers, small business managers, bankers, or even politicians? There may well be something similar in all human creativity, but that it is particularly similar in scientists and artists is without foundation. The similarity between art and science is even less than that between billiards and rugby both of which at least use a ball. Just think of the possibilities of waxing eloquent about the similarities of between the Newtonian mechanics of golf, cricket and tennis...

Art does not explain, but it broadens our experience in ways that are not clearly understood. I value it in its own terms but it has nothing to do with understanding how the world works. To pretend that it does is to trivialise science and do nothing for art. We should stop pretending that the two disciplines are similar, and instead rejoice in the very different ways that they enrich our culture.

Of all the arts, painting is the one least related to science as it does not deal with complex ideas or explanations, is the easiest to appreciate, and the response is often an emotional one. Ideas in art come from art critics and historians, not the works themselves. Unlike the second law of thermodynamics, population genetics or quantum mechanics, which require much basic knowledge to appreciate properly, the response to a painting needs no prior training – though it can increase appreciation and pleasure. I cannot understand what is being referred to when there is reference to critical thinking in art. In what sense can a painting be right or wrong? Anyone can have views about a painting and engage in art discussions. Non-scientists can thrill to scientific ideas but to make meaningful comments about them, and I exclude their application to technology, one actually has to have detailed knowledge. Science needs a much greater, and quite different, intellectual effort – I cannot conceal my own snobbery.

change but not progress. Art is not constrained by reality. It cannot be shown to be wrong.